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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001319

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA A/S DAVID WELCH
NSC FOR DAPNSA ELLIOTT ABRAMS
STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA (MAHER)
PENTAGON FOR OSD ISRAEL DESK OFFICER (ANDERSON)

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SUBJECT: ISRAELI DEFMIN TELLS A/S WELCH ISRAEL WILL TAKE NO ACTION AGAINST HAMAS, WILL NOT TALK WITH A HAMAS GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

¶11. (S) Summary: Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told NEA Assistant Secretary Welch and DAPNSA Elliott Abrams on March 30 that Israel will not communicate with or assist a HAMAS-led Palestinian Authority (PA). Mofaz said that he personally believes PA President Abu Mazen will become increasingly irrelevant and of no use to Israel, and expects the GOI will adopt this view in early April. Mofaz said he will discuss with IDF and General Security Services chiefs how to deal with the new situation on April 2. Israel expects that Palestinian terrorist groups will continue to attempt terrorist attacks and that the HAMAS-led government and Abu Mazen will do nothing to prevent this. Mofaz said that, in spite of this, Israel will not initiate any immediate action against HAMAS, and will pursue a wait-and-see policy with respect to the PA. Mofaz said Israel is concerned with what it views as increasing preparedness by Hezbollah to confront Israel along its northern border. END SUMMARY.

ISRAEL WILL NOT TALK WITH A HAMAS-LED PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

¶12. (S) During the hour-and-a-half meeting, DefMin Mofaz reiterated more than once that Israel will not communicate with a HAMAS-led Palestinian Authority. He added that drawing a distinction between PA President Abu Mazen and the new government is pointless, because HAMAS ministers will not carry out any orders issued by Abu Mazen. Allowing that Abu Mazen disagrees with HAMAS's concept, the DefMin nevertheless characterized the PA President as irrelevant and suggested he would become more irrelevant over time. Faced with what he termed a "very complex situation," Mofaz said that Israel will "wait and see" what happens over the next several months. Mofaz implied that Israel would welcome the HAMAS-led government's failure and collapse, but allowed that it might not happen, and suggested that Iran and Syria would begin to bankroll the PA. He said that he will discuss how to deal with the new situation -- "considering that Abu Mazen and HAMAS are one entity and one authority" -- with IDF and General Security Services chiefs on April 2.

¶13. (S/NF) A/S Welch said that, as a matter of policy, the U.S. will have no/no contact with any HAMAS government, ministers, officials, with the only exception being in cases where it is necessary to ensure the safety of American citizens. A/S Welch said that overall U.S. assistance to the PA will decline over the next few months, even while the U.S. emphasizes that our humanitarian assistance to the Palestinians is increasing. A/S Welch explained to a skeptical Mofaz that the USG believes it necessary to maintain contact with Abu Mazen. In part this is to calm the Europeans, who, he said, are seized with the notion of an impending humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, and might act in a way that undercuts U.S. and Israeli efforts to weaken Hamas.

ISRAEL EXPECTS TERRORIST ATTACKS TO CONTINUE

¶14. (S) Mofaz said that, with HAMAS now running the PA, Israel expects attempted terrorist attacks against green-line Israel to continue, and perhaps increase. He allowed that HAMAS might not execute terrorist attacks, but said he expects that they will allow Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, and other Palestinian groups to attempt attacks in the name of "resistance." Mofaz suggested that Fatah members may increasingly join in attacks as they see reductions in their salaries. Mofaz said that attempts to get Abu Mazen to rein in the terrorist groups will be futile. In the unlikely event he tried to do so, nobody would respect his orders -- even the Palestinian National Security Forces. As support for his dire predictions, Mofaz pointed to the launching of three Qassam rockets out of the Gaza Strip earlier in the day, a foiled suicide bombing attempt on March 29, and PIJ's launch of a GRAD-A Katyusha rocket from the

Gaza Strip on March 28.

ISRAEL TO TAKE WAIT AND SEE ATTITUDE; DO NO HARM

15. (S/NF) In spite of the bleak scenario Mofaz painted, he said that Israel would not initiate any immediate action against HAMAS. He added that the GOI takes very seriously the plight of the Palestinian people, and wants to facilitate humanitarian assistance through all the existing passages between green-line Israel and the Gaza Strip. He expressed frustration with what he characterized as an inexplicable resistance by the Palestinians to opening the Kerem Shalom passage for trade in both directions. He reiterated the GOI position on the Karni passage -- that security concerns will dictate the opening and closing of all passages (e.g., Karni, Kerem Shalom, Erez and Sufa) between green-line Israel and the Gaza Strip. While Mofaz left the room for a pre-scheduled phone call with SECDEF Rumsfeld, A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams pressed Amos Gilad and BGEN Dangott for details on Israeli complaints about the Rafah passage between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Gilad promised to try to provide more useful intelligence on suspect Palestinians whom Israel alleges the EU, Egyptian and Palestinian border guards have failed to prevent from crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. Gilad said it would be better if the Egyptians would take over both sides of the crossing, as the Egyptians have demonstrated a better performance track record against smugglers.

A/S WELCH EXPLAINS HIS MISSION

16. (S) A/S Welch made it clear that he and DAPNSA Abrams were on a "strategic reconnaissance" mission in the region, and would be visiting Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia before returning to Washington. A/S Welch said that "friendly" Arab countries had made it clear that they share USG concern about a HAMAS-led Palestinian Authority, and are prepared to withhold assistance to it. He noted that the USG will carefully monitor their actions against their words. A/S Welch also noted that the USG had obtained a strong statement from the Quartet laying out conditions for interaction with the new PA government. Welch cautioned that EU member states do not have a common policy on assistance, and that the behavior of the UN's representative to the Quartet, and the Russians, have raised concerns in the USG. Nevertheless, A/S Welch said, the coalition of like-minded governments has formed a solid position against the HAMAS-led PA. Israel's behavior over the next several months should contribute to maintaining that position, and not undermine it.

ISRAEL CONCERNED HIZBALLAH PREPARING FOR FIGHT

17. (S) Mofaz, backed by his adviser, BGEN Dangott, said that Israel is concerned that Hizballah is increasing its preparedness for a confrontation with Israel along its northern border -- the aim being to kidnap Israeli soldiers for use as bargaining chips. Dangott noted that Hizballah has been strengthening tactical positions close to the Blue Line, and shoring up logistical support structures further into Lebanon on a daily basis. Responding to A/S Welch's question about a Soviet-made tungsten-tipped RPG captured from Hizballah during its November 2005 incursion into Israel, Mofaz said he raised the issue with Russian DefMin Sergey Ivanov in Italy, and that Ivanov replied that they were "old weapons made by the USSR, not by Russia." A/S Welch informed Mofaz that Secretary Rice raised the issue with Russian FM Sergey Lavrov, and that Lavrov promised to investigate the matter. A/S Welch added that the USG is concerned about such weapon systems making their way into terrorists' hands, and that the RPGs that Hizballah used in November appears to have been transferred directly from Syria.

18. (U) Attending the meeting on the Israeli side were the DefMin's military adviser, BGEN Eitan Dangott; and MOD POL-MIL Bureau Head Amos Gilad. A/S Welch and DAPNSA Abrams were joined by the Ambassador, USSC MGEN Dayton, the DATT and the POL-MIL Officer.

19. (U) NEA Assistant Secretary Welch cleared this cable.

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JONES